**ARCHAEOLOGY** 

## Stair way to Heaven

For nearly two years, the Ehud Netzer Expedition at Herodium has been unearthing the grand entranceway that Herod built to his palace-fortress at Upper Herodium. Even though they have been excavating Herodium for many years, archaeologists Roi Porat, Yaakov Kalman, and Rachel Chachy-Laureys are surprised by what they found – so surprised that they are rethinking their entire interpretation of how Herod conceived his monumental burial estate. Porat, the expedition's head field archaeologist, shares his thoughts on the latest finds while touring Herodium with the ERETZ Staff.

> by Yadin Roman





Photographs courtesy of the Ehud Netzer Expedition at Herodium.

Above and left: An aerial view of Herodium showing the arched entrance corridor and the two monumental flights of steps that ascend the mountain at slightly different angles.

erodium, Herod's grand burial estate, is in no rush to reveal its secrets. After being excavated continuously for dozens of years, the site on the edge of the Judean Desert has offered archaeologists so many stunning surprises that it seems that it could not possibly offer any more. Yet it just has. The conclusions drawn from nearly two years of painstaking work to expose the grand entrance that Herod built to his mountain palace-fortress at Upper Herodium has led the Ehud Netzer Expedition at Herodium to reconsider its entire interpretation of how Herod conceived and built his burial site.

Gideon Foerster's excavation of Herodium in the 1970s revealed this entrance's uppermost extreme; he and his team discovered a handsome vestibule adjacent to the palace-fortress's courtyard. The vestibule's plastered walls still bear impressive remains of colorful frescoes from the days of Herod, some 2,000 years ago. Herod had encased the mountain with a mantle of compressed earth in order to give it a cone-like shape. Exploratory probes from the vestibule along the mantle revealed the tops of a series of arches that were believed to be supports of a passageway that led to the vestibule, which appeared to be the original







Above (left): In the 1970s, archaeologists found a blocked vestibule. Exploratory probes revealed an arched passageway once led to it.

Above (right): Remains of the wooden walls Bar Kokhba's forces built to reinforce their tunnels.

Facing page: The unexcavated entrance corridor.

entrance to the mountain-fortress. It seemed obvious to all that this passage through the mantle was the main entranceway to the mountain palace-fortress.

What was not obvious was the reason two staircases had been built further down the slope leading to what seemed to be the beginning of the passageway through the mantle. These monumental, majestic steps had been built one atop the other, but they were not built at the same angle. These differences naturally raise the question of what exactly their purpose was and precisely where they led. Both staircases run between the theater on the mountain slope and the monumental mausoleum thought to be Herod's tomb, and climb beyond them to the entrance to the palace-fortress on the summit, or so it was thought.

Previous articles (most recently "The Tumulus of Herodium," ERETZ 139-140) already have covered the process of building Herodium and Herod's burial estate, however, it seems appropriate to summarize it briefly here for the sake of convenience. There is no information of or

evidence at Herodium from before Herod's time. The site is first mentioned in connection with Herod's night flight, during the festival of Shavuot in the year 40 BCE, from Jerusalem to Idumea, the land of his forefathers south of Jerusalem. Herod was fleeing from Antigonus Mattathias II, the Hasmonean prince who convinced the Parthians to invade Jerusalem and replace its pro-Roman rulers: the prince's uncle Hyrcanus II, Herod's brother Phasael, and Herod. The Parthians managed to take Hyrcanus and Phasael prisoner – by trickery – but Herod outsmarted them and managed to escape from the besieged city. After Phasael committed suicide in captivity, Herod prepared for a final showdown with Antigonus Mattathias's forces at Herodium, which was in the heart of Idumea.

Several generations earlier, in 112 BCE, Hasmonean ruler John Hyrcanus I conquered Idumea. He converted its residents to Judaism and annexed its lands to his kingdom. His son and successor Alexander Yannai appointed a member of the Idumean nobility, Herod's grandfather Antipater

I, to govern Idumea. Herod's father Antipater II apparently filled the role after Antipater I died. Herod's father or grandfather may have built fortresses at Herodium and Masada to assert control in Idumea, but it is not possible to date the archaeological finds at Herodium precisely enough to ascertain this. In any case, Herod's construction works at the site are so extensive that they seem to have erased all traces of anything that was there beforehand.

Once Herod succeeded in his lengthy campaign to conquer Judea and control of the kingdom was firmly in his hands, he erected a palace-fortress on top of the mountain where he had fought the fateful battle against Antigonus Mattathias's forces years before. At the foot of the mountain, he built an expansive estate that also served as a regional capital. He adorned it with a pool so large it had an artificial island in the middle of it. Herod surrounded the pool with magnificent palaces and buildings. When his good friend Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, the powerful military commander who was second only to Roman emperor Augustus, decided to visit his kingdom in 15 BCE, Herod added more facilities to Herodium, including a Roman theater, a royal room to host his guest in luxurious comfort, and more palaces. Here, at this isolated spot on the edge of the desert, Herod hosted Agrippa in the best Roman style.

Herod apparently began to construct his burial site at

Herodium only after Agrippa's visit. In those days, kings and rulers began to think about commemorating themselves with a grand burial site while they still were quite young. Life expectancy was not long during Roman times. Anyone who reached the age of 50 was considered old and kings and rulers did not always live to a ripe old age, sometimes spending less years walking the earth than their subjects.

Perhaps inspired by the tumuli of ancient Greece and Rome, Herod decided to cover Herodium with a mantle of compressed earth and stone that would turn the mountain into a perfect cone. In an impressive feat of engineering, he built a smooth casing enveloping the upper reaches of the mountain and covering the walls of the mountain palacefortress to a height of some 20 meters. Only a single structure was left standing on the now-smooth slopes: his mausoleum. It stood out, gloriously alone on the slopes that actually were a key component of the builder king's monumental memorial.

The excavations that Ehud Netzer and his fellow archaeologists conducted shed light on the process of constructing the mantle. The structures Herod had built earlier on the slopes, including the theater for Agrippa's visit, were buried inside the mantle, which completely encircles the entire mountain. The mausoleum was surrounded with supporting walls, which prevented the mantle from covering the tomb

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Above (top): The entrance corridor consisting of three tiers of arches (two of which are visible here) after being excavated. Above (bottom): Archaeologist Yaakov Kalman standing under the skewed arch, in which one of the stones slipped out of place, perhaps due to an earthquake.

Facing page: The blocked corridor before being excavated.

and made it stand out even more from its surroundings.

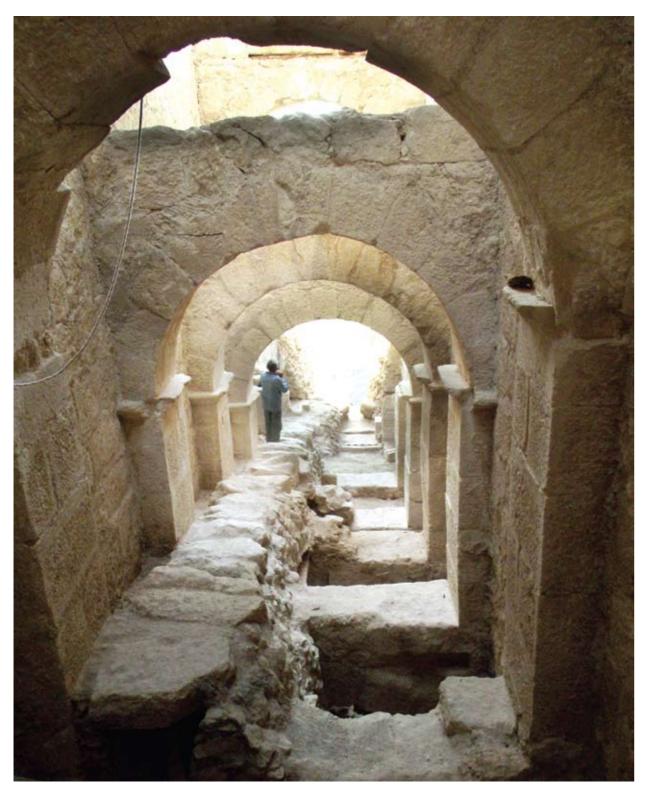
Since the mantle covered the walls of the mountain palace-fortress, it also covered the previous entrance route leading to it, which most likely extended along the length of the slopes or perhaps twisted up the slope like the Snake Path at Masada. This meant a new path was needed, one that would not detract from Herod's perfect cone. This new path, archaeologists conjectured, started at the monumental flight of steps that was built at the same time as the mantle. The steps led in the direction of the vestibule that Foerster uncovered in his excavations in the 1970s.

The riddle of the two flights of stairs, one on top of the other, and their relationship to the entrance system to the palace-fortress and the mantle haunted archaeologists. Therefore, about a year and a half ago, Roi Porat, Yaakov Kalman, and Rachel Chachy-Laureys, who have been leading the research of Herodium on behalf of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Institute of Archaeology since Netzer's untimely death in 2010, began to unearth the corridor that led through the mantle into the palace-fortress. They hoped to discover why two separate flights of steps had been constructed and what purpose each of them had served. When the work began, ERETZ Magazine reported on the archaeologists' conjecture that revealing the entrance route at its full length would solve not only the riddle of the steps, but also more complex questions such as the relationship between the steps and the large tower on the summit, which some are convinced is Herod's tomb, despite the discovery of a mausoleum on Herodium's slope.

In recent months, the excavation team exposed the entrance corridor. One of the first surprises the team encountered was a wooden wall that had been built between the vestibule and the corridor. The wall had been formed with wooden beams taken from the palace's ceilings and arranged in a crisscross pattern together with a large wooden board that also came from somewhere in the palace. As work on the corridor continued, the archaeologists discovered more and more of these wooden beams. They reinforced the walls of the tunnels that Bar Kokhba's forces dug through the mantle during the Bar Kokhba Revolt in 132-5 CE. The tunnels were part of the strategy to defend Bar Kokhba's headquarters at Herodium and were used to sally out and assault the Roman army, destroy its siege equipment, and then disappear into the depths of the earth. Since much of the mantle was made of compressed earth, the sides of the tunnels through it needed to be reinforced with wood or stone so they would not collapse. When the excavation of the tunnel started it was not clear why Bar Kokhba's rebels had to reinforce their assault tunnels in the corridor itself and why they sealed the passageway between the entrance corridor and the vestibule at the palace's gate.



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Above: The arches of the entrance corridor rest on stylized columns. Notice the drainage channel on the left side of the corridor. Facing page: The paving stones of the entrance plaza to the corridor.

After all, they assumed, the entrance corridor had not been full of the compressed earth that formed the mantle.

As the excavation work progressed, the team uncovered an amazingly beautiful entrance corridor with three tiers of arches on stylized columns. The bottom series of arches elevates the corridor to the level of the entrance to the palace-fortress, seven meters above the bedrock. The steps leading to the gate of the palace-fortress pass through the second tier of arches. The third tier of arches soars above it, reinforcing the supporting walls on both sides of the corridor so that the weight of the compressed earth of the mantle does not cause the corridor to cave in.

At the point on the slope where the corridor ended, the archaeologists found remains of a small plaza paved with large stones. One of the two flights of stairs led directly to this plaza at the entrance to the arched corridor. The steps continued into the corridor and ascended gradually to the palace-fortress's entrance gate.

Naturally the corridor was constructed before the mantle, but something was amiss. One of the lowest arches in the central series of arches shows the construction process did not proceed flawlessly. A stone in this arch shifted from its place, distorting the angle of the arch. This may have been the result of a minor earthquake or tremor, Porat suggests.

As he and his colleagues delved into the depths of Herod's arched corridor they encountered the greatest surprise found at the site since the discovery of Herod's mausoleum. It turns out that the corridor was never used. Furthermore, Herod apparently changed his mind about the corridor and ordered it filled up with earth, covered, and buried inside the mantle. It turns out that after the mantle was completed, the entrance to the mountain palace-fortress was not this stunning corridor whose steps could be ascended with ease, but the flight of steps that made its way towards the corridor and once it reached the mantle, angled up steeply and climbed up on the mantle itself to the palace wall – 10 meters above the previous entrance, which was not sealed off with large stones. After Herod decided to eliminate the entrance corridor, a closed drainage channel was built through it to drain the rainwater from the courtyard of the mountain palace-fortress. Since the corridor had been sealed, it is almost perfectly preserved, from the rows of complete arches that still are standing in their places to the decorative columns they rest upon.

These discoveries mean that the theories regarding Herod's burial estate at Herodium must be reconsidered. It was thought that after Herod's death, the mountain palacefortress continued to serve as the rulers' palace and a grand ceremonial staircase led from the bottom of the mountain to the palace-fortress on its summit. Now it turns out that the staircase ascended steeply skyward, meaning it did not



provide easy access to the palace-fortress, but rose at a grade that was nearly impossible to climb. The steps may have led to a new entrance gate or perhaps to a closed monument that no one could approach, a palace of the dead. Herod may have planned for the entire complex – the mausoleum on the slope, the palace-fortress soaring above it with the tower that could be seen from afar, and the majestic steps – to serve as a lasting memorial to himself, the great builder. This may have inspired him to seal Upper Herodium, the entire palace-fortress with its different wings and towers, behind a gate at the top of the monumental staircase. Perhaps it only could be entered for special events or perhaps it could not be entered at all.

The excavation findings provide an explanation for the newer staircase. However, the purpose of the older staircase, the one that is located below it and leads to the arched corridor, still is not clear. Perhaps it too is the result of Herod changing his mind about his burial site.

Of course, all this is mere speculation. All that the archaeologists are willing to say is that the entrance complex to Herodium with the handsome arched corridor and the steps leading to it was never in use. Since the mantle also covered the entrance corridor, it seems Herod changed his mind and conception of his final resting place, not only regarding the mausoleum, which some are convinced is too small for a great builder like Herod, but regarding his entire burial estate at Herodium. He apparently chose to memorialize himself with a dramatic tumulus-like monument that soars high above the surrounding desert, with a steep staircase leading up to the gate to the heavens.

Porat and his colleagues are continuing their work by excavating the staircases on Herodium's slope. Perhaps they will uncover the solution to the riddle of the two staircases. At this point, all that they can be sure of is that it will contain additional surprises.

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